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“Governing Without Development? Polycrisis and the Governance Paradox in Africa’s Post-Aid Economies: The Case of Côte d’Ivoire”

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Introduction - *Governing development in an era of polycrisis.*

Chapter I - *From government to governance in development.*

Chapter II - *The shift from development to risk management.*

Chapter III - *Africa’s post-aid economies: external development governance and neo-paternalist logics.*

Introduction - *Governing development in an era of polycrisis*

To what extent do contemporary global development governance frameworks reproduce neo-paternalistic logics towards Africa’s post-aid economies, despite the envisaged shift toward partnership, local ownership and good governance?

In the context of recent global transformations, development governance has been profoundly reshaped by the intersection of multiple and interrelated crises. Geopolitical fragmentation, structural economic vulnerability, climate-related shocks, cross-border migration

Chapter IV - *Case study: the governance paradox in Côte d’Ivoire.*

Final remarks - *Recentering development within contemporary governance frameworks.*

Bibliography.

flows and population displacement interact in ways that challenge traditional frameworks of international cooperation.

This governance condition, often described as “polycrisis”¹, does not merely generate a critical external environment for development policy, but signals a systemic transformation in the way development is governed at global and regional levels. Polycrisis indeed not only functions as the general background, but it rather operates as the enabling mechanism transforming development governance: the interaction of interdependent

¹ Morin, Jean-Frédéric, Amandine Orsini, and Oran Young. “Governing Complex Systems: Polycentricity, Fragmentation and Polycrisis.” *Global Governance* 26, no. 4 (2020): 1–17.

crises reinforce each other reshaping priorities, power balances and modes of governance.²

Within this evolving landscape, the objectives and instruments of development cooperation have undergone a significant shift. Traditionally, development governance was oriented toward long-term developmental goals, such as economies' structural transformation, long-term human development, tackling inequality, and enhancing state capacity. Over the years, these goals have progressively been subordinated to concerns related to risk containment, stability and predictability. Accordingly, development governance is thus now oriented toward managing potential sources of disruption rather than fostering transformative change.³ This reconfiguration is most clearly reflected in the governance frameworks applied to African economies that have formally transitioned beyond low-income status at the expense of being ever more embedded within governance-based cooperation frameworks.⁴ Often labelled as "middle-income countries", this paper argues that these economies are more accurately described as "post-aid economies": countries that have experienced sufficient economic growth to reduce access to concessional development assistance, while remaining structurally vulnerable, highly unequal and exposed to external shocks.⁵ While formally reclassified, these economies continue to face persistent development challenges, including limited fiscal space and policy agency, fragile institutional capacity, and deep socio-economic disparities.⁶ Concurrently, they are demanded to act as autonomous, responsible and well-governing economic partners within the global development system.

Against this backdrop, external development governance plays a particularly influential role in shaping this transformation.

While formally committed to partnership and grounded in principles of ownership and differentiation, external contemporary governance reflects neo-paternalist logics, relying on managerial practices, conditional

cooperation and crisis-driven priorities, that constrain domestic policy autonomy and reproduce asymmetrical power relations. As a result, development risks being managed through conditional control rather than spurring a transformative process, thus becoming a mechanism of discipline rather than emancipation.⁷ This raises critical questions about whether global strategies genuinely enable development, or whether they contribute to governing without development.

Adopting a critical and decolonial perspective, this paper aims to examine how global development governance frameworks interact with the structural realities of Africa's post-aid economies.

These countries seem to be confronted with a central "governance paradox": as access to redistributive development instruments declines, expectations regarding governance performance, institutional resilience, and political responsibility intensify.

Within this frame, the paper argues that governance development is no longer conceived as an outcome of advancement process, but rather as a highly-benchmarked precondition for cooperation, financing and political legitimacy. In order to translate this thesis empirically, Côte d'Ivoire will be examined as case study, given its status as a transitional post-aid economy, marked by an increasing reliance on external development governance mechanisms.

Ultimately, the following analysis will examine the governance paradox in Africa's post-aid economies under conditions of polycrisis, questioning to what extent current approaches genuinely support development and to what extent they contribute to governing without development.

Chapter I - From government to governance in development

The concept of development governance traditionally refers to the frameworks of authority, coordination and accountability through which development policies and

² Tooze, Adam. "Welcome to the World of the Polycrisis." *Financial Times*, October 28, 2022.

³ Duffield, Mark. *Development, Security and Unending War: Governing the World of Peoples*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2007.

⁴ Mkandawire, Thandika. "Maladjusted African Economies and Globalisation." *Africa Development*, 30, no. 1-2 (2005): 1-33.

⁵ Alonso, José Antonio, Antonio Luis Cortés, and Stephan Klasen. "LDC and MICs: Developmental Differences and Similarities." *World Development* 59 (2014): 26-41.

⁶ World Bank (WB). *Middle-Income Countries: Challenges and Opportunities*. Washington, DC: World Bank, 2017.

⁷ Escobar, Arturo. *Encountering Development*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995.

outcomes are shaped across multiple levels of governance.⁸ It encompasses the institutions, rules, actors, processes that enable the planning, financing, implementation and monitoring of social and economic development goals at national, regional and global levels. Development governance thus concerns not only who governs, but, more importantly, how development is enacted, regulated and monitored. In this sense, it involves a wide range of actors, including national public institutions, international organisations, bilateral donors, civil society and private actors.

The emergence of development governance appears as a result of the broader shift from conceiving government as a matter of government intervention to understanding it as a governance process. Development was originally envisioned in terms of national planning, domestic public policies, and direct state intervention.

However, the growing influence of globalisation dynamics and multilateral processes progressively re-framed development as a governance issue. This transformation introduced a multiplicity of actors, forms of horizontal and vertical coordination, and a growing reliance on standards, benchmarks, and best practices.⁹ As a result, development came to appear less overtly political, while becoming increasingly technocratic and managerialised.

Within this evolving framework, it is analytically necessary to draw a clear distinction between two critical concepts: governing development and governance development. The former concept denotes the use of development frameworks as instruments for influencing and shaping the behaviour, priorities, and policy orientations of states and societies, as well as for structuring and guiding their actions.¹⁰ *It increasingly involves the use of technical standards, benchmarks and conditional cooperation in shaping policy choices, particularly in structurally vulnerable economies.* The latter, by contrast, is understood as the process through which a combined set of authority, coordination and accountability frameworks shapes development policies and outcomes across multiple governance levels.

⁸ United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). *Governance for Sustainable Development*. New York: UNDP, 2014.

¹⁰ Ferguson, James. *The Anti-Politics Machine: "Development", Depoliticization and Bureaucratic Power in Lesotho*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994.

Therefore, while governing development implies exercising power politics by governing through development without necessarily enacting development policies, development governance delineates, instead, the institutional architecture whereby development policies are designed and assessed.

Over the years, development governance has undergone a profound transformation and has been significantly redefined both in its meaning and effects.¹¹ In this paper, development governance will be the main object of the analysis in relation with the multilateral actors which finance development in order to attain the internationally recognised sustainable development goals, namely, the international financial institutions (IFIs) and the European Union's (EU) development policies. The critical lens will indeed spot that governing development appears to have been outgrown as analytical frame, since it has shaped governance as a mere exercise of discipline, subordinating development to risk management, and acting as a harbinger of neo-paternalist logics.

While the expansion of development governance *beyond state-centric approaches included a wide range of international actors, critical scholarship highlighted that this shift also enabled new forms of power and hierarchical control, whereby development risks becoming a means of governing rather than an end in itself.* The focus issue in contemporary development governance is not the absence of it, but the ways development is increasingly being governed.¹² Although it lays the foundations of a sophisticated apparatus to manage development, its transformative capacity appears limited, resulting in a process of governance pursued as an end rather than a means.

The whole process risks jeopardising development outcomes and ultimately risks ending in governing without development.

Chapter II – *The shift from development to risk management*

¹¹ World Bank (WB). *World Development Report 2017: Governance and the Law*. Washington, DC: World Bank, 2017.

¹² Li, Tania Murray. *The Will to Improve: Governmentality, Development, and the Practice of Politics*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2007.

The metamorphosis that development governance has undergone, as described in the previous chapter, cannot be detached from the recent reassessment of priorities and strategic refocusing in global governance. In the contemporary polycrisis global environment, development has progressively ceased to be framed as a long-term political process of structural transformation and social advancement, characterised by national adaptation. Instead, it has increasingly been reframed as a pivotal instrument of anticipatory and risk management logic aimed at addressing uncertainty, instability, and systemic risk.¹³

Accordingly, traditional-like development governance switches to focus on political instability prevention, debt and financial risks' mitigation, migration flows' containment, global value chain protection, health and climate-induced shocks' management. Development is no longer the primary objective, it has rather turned into a subordinated tool for reducing systemic risks and transnational spillovers that may affect the global order. It has become forward-looking, preventive, and highly technical, relying on performance-based frameworks.¹⁴

This does not appear as a simple readjustment, but rather as a change of logic: if development was originally conceived as a an end in itself, it has now become a means to enable a technical and auxiliary precondition for risk containment, producing a governance paradox, especially in structurally vulnerable economies as the so-called African post-aid economies. These state actors find themselves trapped in a governance dilemma, whereby they are formally recognised as 'partner' rather than 'aid beneficiaries', yet they remain unofficially subject to new forms of hierarchisation and conditionality.

This contradiction fosters a depoliticization of development by which policy choices are outlined as neutral and technical, erasing internal political debate and policy spaces. Moreover, the shift to risk management tends to impose governance mechanisms as neutral disciplinary frameworks, based on indicators, benchmarks and reforms, which operate as indirect control tools, rather than empowerment tools. In this sense,

this contemporary conception implies the securitisation of development, namely, stability and migration phenomena turn out to be the main priorities to shape development policies, instead of paving the way to social transformation. As a result, contemporary governance frameworks tend to prioritise predictability and control over transformative outcomes, letting risk management emerge as a central organising principle of development governance.¹⁵ Within the development-governance nexus, this shift toward risk management produces critical key effects: risk-containment prioritisation enables development governance to increasingly spotlight surveillance, compliance and conditional cooperation, while the development impact of policy choices receives a comparatively lesser evaluation. By this logic, governance does not appear to be embedded within development processes, instead, it functions as a prior and conditioning framework.

In contexts characterised by limited fiscal space, institutional fragility, and exposure to external shocks, risk-based governance frameworks tend to narrow domestic policy options rather than expand them.

In Africa's post-aid economies, declining access to concessional resources coincides with heightened expectations of governance performance.¹⁶ In these geographical settings, risk management comes to be institutionalised through concrete governance and policy practices: early-warning mechanisms, vulnerability indices, performance monitoring, policy coordination, risk assessments and resilience frameworks become key components. Although described as neutral and technical, these instruments actively shape policy priorities by defining which risks are considered legitimate, urgent, and actionable, and by orienting development agendas toward what can be measured, managed, controlled.¹⁷ Yet, there lies an embedded vision of development that privileges control over autonomy and management over transformation, reinforcing the

¹³ Beck, Ulrich. *World at Risk*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2009.

¹⁴ Gill, Stephen. *Power and Resistance in the New World Order*. Basingstoke: Palgrave, Macmillan, 2003.

¹⁵ Duffield, Mark. *Development, Security and Unending War: Governing the World of Peoples*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2007.

¹⁶ Brautigam, Deborah, and Stephen Knack. "Aid Dependence and Governance." *World Development* 32, no. 2 (2004): 255-277.

¹⁷ Merry, Sally Engle. *The Seductions of Quantification. Measuring Human Rights, Gender Violence, and Sex Trafficking*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016.

governance paradox: as development instruments recede, governance demands intensify.¹⁸

The shift from development to risk management thus entails a significant temporal and political transformation. Long-term goals associated with structural change and redistribution are replaced by short-term imperatives linked to crisis prevention. Development policies are expected to deliver immediate stability rather than gradual transformation. Furthermore, this turn reshapes the distribution of responsibility between external actors and partner states: while local ownership and mutual partnership are formally enhanced, risk management is delegated to domestic authorities without granting them a greater policy autonomy nor expanded fiscal capacity.

This dynamic reinforces containment rather than emancipation, promoting a practise of responsibility without power, by which accountability expands while decision-making space contracts.

At its core, the risk-oriented turn in development governance conveys a transformation in the very purpose of development governance.

Used as a disciplinary tool to contain disruption and manage spillovers, it does not erase power relations, but it rearticulates them in less visible forms: hierarchical control is exercised through apparently technical standards, that nonetheless carry normative assumptions on what is and is not appropriate to develop.

Chapter III – Africa’s post-aid economies: external development governance and neo-paternalist logics

As regards the previously discussed practise of responsibility without power, this dynamic is particularly visible in certain African contexts. Usually categorised as “middle-income countries” (MICs), some African countries that have transitioned beyond low-income status are commonly portrayed as development success stories, having achieved sustained growth and deeper integration into global markets. Yet, their economic advancement does not necessarily imply a thorough inclusive development, hiding behind the income-based taxonomy their structural vulnerability, high internal inequality, limited productive

transformation, and limited access to concessional development assistance.

Where growth does not translate into broad-based structural change, economies may get statistically reclassified, while remaining developmentally fragile. For this reason, this paper will adopt the concept of post-aid economies rather than MICs, in order to provide a more precise analytical lens by moving beyond income thresholds, and to highlight their central, yet marginalised position, within global governance structures. This concept captures all those Africa’s economies which are considered to be too advanced for receiving traditional aid, despite being too vulnerable to operate with full autonomy, making their partnership framed in terms of compliance rather than of co-determination.¹⁹ Indeed, they benefit from reduced access to official funding assistance while tackling systemic constraints. In light of this, African post-aid economies often appear as objects instead of agents of governance, as they suffer from the growth paradox without inclusive development: the more they are expected to perform as autonomous, responsible and well-governed partners, the more they are subjected to external governance frameworks that shape and reduce their policy space. Less aid often implies major implicit conditionality, which in turn limits real autonomy.

It follows that reduced access to concessional aid does not automatically signify greater policy independence; instead, it often translates into stricter governance standards, monitoring practices and higher performance demands. In a nutshell, as financial assistance declines, governance demands intensify.

This paradox appears to be further amplified by the global polycrisis, which legitimises emergency interventions and securitised forms of governance in the name of European priorities, such as financial stability, supply chain security, migration containment.

Under these conditions, global priorities return aligned again with development cooperation goals, making Africa’s post-aid economies increasingly central to international agendas, and at the same time completely

¹⁸ Harrison, Graham. *The World Bank and Africa: The Construction of Governance States*. London: Routledge, 2004.

¹⁹ Brautigam, Deborah, and Stephen Knack. “Aid Dependence and Governance.” *World Development* 32, no.2 (2004): 255-277.

marginal in agenda-setting and rule-making processes.

This transformation also involves a changing status of governance itself, which becomes progressively framed as a prerequisite for investment, rather than as an outcome of development. Africa's post-aid economies are therefore expected to substantiate governance performance before developmental gains are effectively implemented.

Against this backdrop, contemporary development governance seems to be shaped by what will be called "neo-paternalist logics".

Unlike traditional paternalism, which relied on formal hierarchies and direct intervention, neo-paternalism is embedded in subtle managerial practices, technocratic benchmarks and partnership discourses, that formally enhance equality of partners, while addressing them as passive objects of governance.²⁰ In this way, external actors such as international financial institutions and multilateral donors, exercise their influence through regulatory and normative logics, that are neither coercive nor directly imposed, while shaping the environment within which decisions are made. These actors play a key role in transmitting governance expectations through channels that are justified in terms of risk reduction and efficiency, such as policy advice, reform roadmaps, technical assistance.

Neo-paternalist logics do not entail deliberate domination exercised by external actors, rather they reflect a governance configuration in which power asymmetries are normalised; thus, it results that African post-aid economies are sustained by a form of guided autonomy, where independence is recognised in principle only. Neo-paternalist logics are mainly evident in the language of partnership itself, which coexists with chronic imbalances in agenda-setting power: whereas these post-aid countries are treated as equals on a formal level, external actors hold full authority to set priorities and evaluate outputs. In essence, domestic ownership appears to be promoted but carefully delimited.

²⁰ Chandler, David. *Resilience: The Governance of Complexity*. London: Routledge, 2014.

²¹ World Bank (WB). *Côte d'Ivoire Country Overview*. Washington DC: World Bank, recent editions.

Chapter IV - Case study: the governance paradox in Côte d'Ivoire

So far it has been outlined what the governance paradox is at a structural level. Yet, it appears imperative to look at its implications within concrete national contexts, in order to better understand how autonomy, responsibility, and external governance interact in practice within a post-aid economy. This chapter therefore adopts a country-specific focus by examining the case of Côte d'Ivoire.

Although often portrayed as a post-conflict recovery success story following the civil unrest experienced in the early 2010s, as well as a regional economic engine in West Africa²¹, Côte d'Ivoire's identity remains marked by structural inequalities, widespread youth unemployment, and great vulnerability to external spillovers.²²

In this respect, this country represents one of the most suitable exemplification of an African post-aid economy.

Over the last decade, indeed, Côte d'Ivoire has profited from a stronger cooperation with multilateral donors, European partners and international financial institutions.²³ It even hosts the headquarters of the African Development Bank, the premier development finance institution and the largest development bank in Africa, established in 1964 to spur sustainable economic growth and social progress, based in Abidjan. However, decolonial critical scholarship suggests that, despite these international affiliations and economic alliances were framed in terms of partnerships and have been using the same language on shared development objectives, they have been operating within asymmetrical power structures and implicit conditionalities, resorting to governance as a disciplinary tool.

Zooming in on this dynamic from a decolonial perspective, it will be unveiled that post-aid economies often exhibit a pattern whereby partnership discourse masks vertical power relations and where policy frameworks are only formally negotiated, but the real acceptable policy choices are pre-decided by external actors. In this sense, this governance paradox pattern seems to confirm a practice of softened explicit policy

²² United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). *Human Development Report: Côte d'Ivoire* (latest available).

²³ International Monetary Fund (IMF). *Côte d'Ivoire Country Reports* (various years).

conditionality, by which access to financing and investment remain closely subject to governance performance, resulting in a rhetorically recognised ownership only.²⁴

In Côte d'Ivoire, external actors' engagement succeeded in embedding local governance reforms with external priorities linked to stability and predictability over social transformation, thus leveraging development governance as a tool for discipline, not as an emancipatory driver.

This mechanism is visible especially in those policy domains related to regional stability and security cooperation, making the Ivorian economy a mere subject to the external policy-making strategy. Côte d'Ivoire consequently occupies a strategic position within multilateral policy frameworks in West Africa.

A concrete instance of this pattern may be observed in Côte d'Ivoire within its recent external governance engagement with the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the European Union (EU).

In 2023, the IMF approved the "Extended Credit Facility" and the "Extended Fund Facility" arrangements for the country, focusing heavily on deficit reduction, fiscal sustainability, and public financial management reforms.²⁵ Within these priorities, financial disbursements appear to be conditional on meeting performance criteria, consolidating the logic whereby governance outcomes serve as a prerequisite for continued support. Likewise, within the framework of the "European Union's Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument" (NDICI - Global Europe), cooperation arrangements with the country combined development with strategic priorities concerning regional stability and migration management.²⁶ Although their formal grounding in partnership and shared purposes, these arrangements reveal how development cooperation in Côte d'Ivoire remains embedded in expansive risk-management paradigms, where funding and strategic recognition are contingent upon compliance with externally defined governance norms. The governance paradox here emerges clearly

once again: while Côte d'Ivoire was demanded to act with self-agency and as an autonomous and responsible partner, its socio-economic development trajectories remain partially externally structured, and its policy space defined by external expectations, policy coordination and standards.

Although illustrating a good example of how post-aid economies represent the shift from aid dependence to governance dependence²⁷, it does not mean that Côte d'Ivoire's political authorities and financial institutions lack agency. Indeed, domestic state actors usually proactively accommodate, and occasionally resist external pressures and imposed conditionalities; nevertheless, these internal-external interactions unfold within asymmetrical and unequal frameworks, that delimit what is and is not politically and economically attainable. Agency persists, but it actively operates under structural boundaries.

Final remarks - *Recentring development within contemporary governance frameworks*

This analysis has argued that, under conditions of polycrisis, contemporary development governance has been reshaped, and that this transformation has affected Africa's post-aid economies.

Yet, the key challenge faced by these countries is not the absence of governance, rather the way in which development is governed; as development governance leans toward risk management, its transformative potential is often sidelined.

The governance paradox associated with non-inclusive-development-models captures a focal friction in current development cooperation: post-aid economies are expected to perform as autonomous partners, while their policy space remains structured by external standards, exercised through performance evaluations and normative expectations.

The country-specific case of Côte d'Ivoire unfolds this paradox in practice. Although the Ivorian economy and political authorities exercise agency with international

²⁴ International Monetary Fund (IMF). *Country Reports on fiscal governance reforms in Côte d'Ivoire*.

²⁵ International Monetary Fund (IMF). *Côte d'Ivoire: Request for an Arrangement under the Extended Credit Facility and Extended Fund Facility*. IMF Country Report, 2023.

²⁶ European Parliament and Council, *Regulation (EU) 2021/947. Establishing the Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument (NDICI – Global Europe)*, Official Journal of the European Union, L 209/1, June 14, 2021.

²⁷ Whitfield, Lindsay. *The Politics of Aid: African Strategies for Dealing with Donors*. Oxford University Press, 2009.

partners, their development trajectory is still framed within asymmetrical governance arrangements and persistent power differentials. It follows that, in order to recentre development within contemporary governance frameworks it is not enough to improve governance performance, it rather calls for a reconfiguration of the purposes of governance itself. Governance cannot indeed survive as an end in itself, detached from substantive development outcomes, if structural transformation is to be achieved. Recentring development thus implies renewing attention to long-term transformation and inequality reduction, promoting development pathways shaped through dialogue with domestic priorities.

From a critical perspective, it needs to be also considered that depoliticising development through technical frameworks narrows democratic internal debate, while acknowledging its inherently political nature allows greater space for locally defined priorities.

Recentring development within governance frameworks thus requires rebalancing the relationship between risk management and developmental objectives, by shifting from governance frameworks toward approaches that prioritise structural transformation.

This also entails that context-specific development pathways would be recognised, and the dominance of one-size-fits-all governance benchmarks would be reduced. Indeed, now that the question is no longer whether governance matters, but what kind of governance is promoted and for which long-term objectives, an additional suggestion would be promoting a development-centred approach adopting governance as an outcome of long-term development processes, and placing transformative goals and policy autonomy at the core of cooperation purposes. Boosting domestic fiscal capacity and social protection systems in post-aid economies could gradually establish the institutional groundwork, that governance frameworks attempt to develop. By this logic, governance should accompany development and not precede it.

Ultimately, it appears imperative to nurture symmetrical and equal partnerships that require reciprocity in agenda-setting, valuing local expertise, and acknowledging that shared development purposes are politically negotiated, not technically predetermined.

Such improvements would not erase asymmetries wholly, but they may allow African post-aid economies

to be recognised as agents of development rather than merely risk management sites.

Without such a shift of logic, the risk of development governance managing vulnerability, instead of reducing it, and of it being a control tool rather than an emancipatory driver, cannot be ruled out.

With the aim to move beyond the enduring “white man’s burden”, whereby the practice of “we develop you” has gradually turned into “we help you manage yourselves according to our priorities”, recentring development demands a shift from a logic of containment to a logic of transformative change. In these terms only, development governance may result not merely in governing risk, but, above all, in empowering substantive development routes.

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